

The Sample Fallacious Argument Against Feminists and their view of Pornography

Put numbers in the paragraph above next to the fallacious arguments and explain them below:

The feminist argument that pornography is harmful has no merit and should not be discussed in college courses. I read "Playboy" magazine, and I don't see how it could be harmful. Feminists might criticize me for looking at porn, but they shouldn't talk; they obviously look at it, too, or they couldn't criticize it. Many important people, including the Presidents, writers, and entertainers who have been interviewed by the magazine and the women who pose in it, apparently agree. Scientific studies so far have not proved that pornography is harmful, so it must not be harmful. Besides, to be harmful, pornography would either have to harm the men who read it or the women who pose in it, and since they both choose these activities, they must not be harmful. Feminists should take a lesson from my parents. They don't like loud music and won't have it in their houses, but they don't go around saying it's harmful to everyone or trying to prevent others from listening to it. Ever since feminists began attacking our popular culture, the moral foundation of our society has been weakened; the divorce rate, for example, continues to rise. If feminists would just cease their hysterical opposition to sex, perhaps relationships in our society would improve. If feminists insist, instead, on banning porn, men will have no freedom and no pleasure left, and large numbers of women will be jobless and will have to work as prostitutes to support themselves. In light of these consequences, feminists shouldn't be surprised if their protests are met with violence. Truly, the feminist argument is baseless.

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A less fallacious argument for roughly the same claim

How might we make a stronger argument for the claim that "the feminist argument that pornography is harmful has no merit"? Let's try to construct an argument that avoids the fallacies above. Please note that much of the "evidence" here will be made up to serve as a model—don't use this page as a source for any actual research on pornography! We'll see what a good argument could look like, even if the evidence needed to make that argument doesn't currently exist.

The feminist argument that pornography is harmful lacks adequate support. First, the feminist argument typically alleges that pornography increases men's willingness to rape women, or at least to think of them only as sex objects. But this argument ignores the fact that the print pornography industry alone earns more money each year than the entire "legitimate" bookselling industry. For that to be true, there must be many, many men and women who read pornography regularly. And yet crime statistics suggest that not many men rape women. Furthermore, most men today believe in women's equality, as a study by Dr. Knowitall and her research group, of the Institute on the Status of Women, demonstrates. Feminists acknowledge that scientific studies have failed to show that porn harms women. If there had been only a few such studies, or if we had reason to believe they were unreliable, we should conclude that nothing has yet been shown about whether porn harms women. But I think that when reliable studies have repeatedly failed to show a relationship, that fact constitutes some evidence that the relationship doesn't exist. So it seems unlikely that porn is harming women in the way the feminist argument alleges.

In the absence of positive evidence from studies, we have to rely on common sense. Can people distinguish between the sometimes-degrading scenarios they see in porn and real life? I believe they can. I think pornography is a lot like television and movies—it presents images that, while they certainly do have some impact on us, we all realize are nothing more than fiction. Young children may have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality, but they are not often exposed to pornography. Men and women who look at porn should know better than to think that it gives a realistic picture of sexual relationships between men and women. If porn cannot be shown to harm women as a class by making them more vulnerable to sexual violence or causing men to think of them as inferior, how else might it be harmful? Feminists have often argued that the porn industry is harmful to the women who work within it—that many of them are abused and exploited. I agree with them that if an industry is mistreating people, it needs to be reformed, and they are doing a public service by pointing out such abuses. But what sort of reform are feminists proposing?

One suggestion I know about has been made by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who argue that there should be a civil rights statute that allows anyone who has been harmed by porn to seek civil damages from pornographers. My concern about this proposal is that although it will not legally be censorship, since the law would not empower the government to stop anyone from producing material based on the ideas it contains, the civil rights statute will have the same effect as censorship. Pornographers may be so afraid of facing lawsuits that many of them will stop producing porn—and a situation where people are afraid to put forward certain kinds of writing or pictures because they will face legal consequences seems to violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the first amendment. Porn, like books, may express certain ideas about men, women, and sex, and those ideas may have political ramifications—but just as controversial books are protected, porn should be. It may even do more good than harm by provoking thoughtful discussion and debate about men, women, and sexuality.

Adapted from: "Fallacies." *Home* | *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*.
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